

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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A Healthy Church

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

At the beginning of his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul is bubbling over with pride and thanksgiving. Not the kind of pride that says, "Look at what I've accomplished." Rather, the kind of pride that leads to giving thanks to God for what he has accomplished. More specifically, Paul says that as he prays, he thanks God for the Thessalonian believers, recognizing that their life together is the result of God's power working among them.

"We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers," says Paul. "We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 2-3). Clearly, the Thessalonians have brought Paul a lot of joy, inspiration, and encouragement. They're never far from his heart. They're continually in his thoughts. So like a parent smiling with pride over what his children have become, Paul tells them that they have come a long way since the gospel first arrived in their lives.

Paul then takes the Thessalonians on a walk down memory lane. He reminds them of those exciting, power-packed days when he and his coworkers first preached the good news of Christ to them. These weren't just human words transmitting a human message. These words, by the work of the Holy Spirit, had become the very Word of God to the Thessalonians. They heard themselves being called to turn away from idols and to turn to the living and true God, whose Son Jesus had been crucified and raised, and who would return to complete God's saving work in their lives.

After welcoming the gospel, the Thessalonians began allowing the Lord to reshape them in his own image. They followed the Christlike example set by Paul and his fellow missionaries. They demonstrated faithfulness in the face of adversity. They not only imitated the behavior of Christ and Paul, but also became a living example to others in their region. In fact, says Paul, "your faith in God has become known everywhere" (v. 8a).

This "everywhere" now includes us. We too can watch and learn from the Thessalonians. We too can become more like Christ by becoming more like them. We can listen in on Paul's conversation with them, and in the process spot some of the signs of a healthy church.

I'm not sure if Paul and his coworkers would have used the phrase "church health." It's a more contemporary expression used by lots of Christian leaders to describe the overall condition of a congregation, especially when it comes to flourishing. Though the concept of church health has been around for a while, it gets repeated and renewed attention as church life moves through time and changing circumstances.

Earlier this year, *Christianity Today* produced a collection of articles directed particularly toward pastors and other Christian leaders, inviting them to reflect on issues of church health, especially as we've come further out of the conditions created by COVID-19. Like so many other parts of our lives, the past two years have been hard on congregations. We're continuing to navigate through the impact of the pandemic in every aspect of our church's life—our worship gatherings, our educational ministries, our facilities management, our budget and finances, our engagement with the community.

I'm thankful for Pastor John Fariss's ministry of the word among you last Sunday while I was away. As I listened to the recording of his sermon, I was struck by how he emphasized the various "holes" that we find ourselves in, individually and together. When it comes to congregations, he said, "I dare say, COVID has put just about every church into a hole. Things will probably never be the same again as they were before that. But that doesn't mean you have to stay in that hole." Then he went on to emphasize how we as a church have to find a new horizon, new ways to carry out our God-given mission, citing our participation in the Bryans Road Shopping Center educational resource day as an example. So this season in our congregation's life is an opportune time to think about church health, and the things that contribute to it.

Long before COVID-19, Paul was dealing with issues that determined the health and effectiveness of his churches. No doubt, as the gospel spread, he paid some attention to the size of the communities being created. After all, numbers help tell the story. When I returned to the office this past week after being on vacation, I was naturally curious to see what the attendance was like last Sunday. And by Wednesday night's business meeting, I had gotten up to speed on our church's financial picture during the previous two months. As I said, numbers help tell the story. But they don't tell the whole story. Or as one pastor has put it, "Numbers may inform us, but they don't define us."¹

Church health includes the stats, but also goes beyond the stats. When we listen to Paul's overflow of thanksgiving for the Thessalonians, we can hear him highlighting some of the essential marks of a healthy congregation. In this case, non-numerical criteria that indicate spiritual strength and flourishing. In particular, I want us to focus on the three characteristics Paul stresses in verse three. These are faith, love, and hope.

Many of us are familiar with this trio from 1 Corinthians 13 where Paul is reminding the Corinthians about the supremacy of the gift of love within their congregation. "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (v. 13). Here in 1 Thessalonians, the words are the same, but the setting is different. In 1 Corinthians, Paul is trying to help the Corinthians keep spiritual gifts in perspective, while in this morning's Scripture he's thanking God for the ways that the gospel is bearing fruit among the Thessalonians.

Paul knows that the gospel has been effective in the Thessalonian church because he has received uplifting news about their life together in Christ. Timothy, Paul's coworker, has returned from a visit to the Thessalonians. He has brought Paul an encouraging report about the ongoing faithfulness of the Thessalonians. So Paul now writes to them in order to consolidate and confirm their faithfulness. In short, he writes to build them up as the people of God.

First of all, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians' "work of faith." This is an awkward expression in English. The original language is probably better captured with a phrase such as "work that stems from faith," "work that belongs to faith," or, as the NIV renders it, "work produced by faith."

So one of the key marks of a healthy church is the presence of faith. Not faith just in the sense of saying I believe in certain doctrines about God and Jesus. Not faith strictly as an intellectual exercise. Rather, faith as a response of your total self to the saving grace of God in Christ. Faith as trusting obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Faith not only as an initial commitment to Christ, but as an ongoing daily attitude of the heart, a persevering confidence in the goodness of God, particularly in the face of trials and adversity.

In a healthy church, the authenticity and durability of faith take the form of action. Faith comes to expression through acts of mercy and kindness, through deeds of justice and peace, through concrete behavior that reflects God's will for our lives. Show me a healthy congregation, and I will show you a community of believers whose belief comes to expression in acts of love.

Secondly, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians' "labor of love." Here is another evocative expression. We often use the phrase "labor of love" to refer to something that requires significant effort and leaves us with a deep sense of satisfaction at having worked for the good of others. A labor of love is something we undertake for the pleasure of the work or out of affection for someone else.

What's true in other areas of life is also true within the community of believers, namely, that love is hard work. Paul reminds us that love is not merely a warm feeling in the heart. Love requires exertion, effort, and sacrifice. Loving others for the sake of the gospel can be exhausting. And yet, as tiring as Christian love can be, the love of God for us sustains us and reenergizes us, so that we are able to press on in loving one another.

In a healthy church, you'll find people who aren't just kindly disposed toward one another. They aren't just connected to each other by a warm fuzzy sensation. Their love is hard at work. They're exerting themselves in costly ways. Show me a healthy congregation, and I'll show you a community of believers who are making sacrifices, going out of their way, and giving themselves away in constant, faithful obedience to the grace of God in Christ.

Thirdly, Paul gives thanks for the Thessalonians "steadfastness of hope." In this case, hope is in the third, and in some ways climactic, position. Having praised God for the Thessalonians' faith and love, now Paul stands encouraged by their hope. This is a congregation whose faithful endurance in the present is driven by its confidence in the future.

Their hope, like our own, is built on the solid foundation of what God has already done through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christian hope doesn't mean that we are called to be optimistic, cheerful folks, no matter how hard things get. It doesn't mean forsaking the past and blindly taking a chance that everything will turn out alright in the end. No, as Paul says, our hope is "in the Lord Jesus Christ." Christian hope looks back to God's triumph over sin and death at the cross, and then confidently looks forward to the culmination of God's saving sovereignty when Christ comes again. This is what enables us to remain steadfast.

In a healthy church, hope can be seen, heard, and touched in the way that people live their lives forward. They live with alertness to the kingdom of God in the here and now, and with watchfulness for the full arrival of God's reign in the future. This sense of anticipation and expectation, generated by the Spirit, fuels their life together. Show me a healthy congregation, and I'll show you a community of believers who live by the conviction that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil 1:6).

As we live toward that day, God is at work, giving us life and vitality through Christ. Times and circumstances change, but our congregation's need for the Lord's strength remains unchanged. At all times, our church's health comes from the Lord. So even now, he's still forming us into a fellowship where faith works, love labors, and hope endures. Thanks be to God.

¹ Karl Vaters, "28 Non-Numerical Signs of a Healthy Church." Pivot. November 20, 2017. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/karl-vaters/2017/november/28-non-numerical-signs-of-healthy-church.html> (August 11, 2022).